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Crisis puts spotlight on French CIA

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PARIS — They call it *La Piscine*, the swimming pool.

It lies in a forgotten fringe of the city, behind thick stone walls watched by cameras and topped by spikes, behind signs that say, "Military Zone: Filming and Photography Prohibited." They give no other clue.

Officially, the compound is La Direction Generale de la Securite Exterieur (DGSE), but within the trade it is simply *La Piscine*, after the public pool that lies just across the Rue des Tonnelles.

The 2,000 to 2,500 people who work there — half are military, half civilian — are the French CIA, and in the last two weeks they have gone from obscurity to the heart of a very public French governmental crisis.

An official inquiry is under way to determine whether DGSE agents, either on their own or with high-level approval, planted the two mines that sank a ship of the ecologist group Greenpeace last month before it could sail to protest against French nuclear tests in the South Pacific.

Numerous press reports, based on unidentified sources, already have concluded that *La Piscine* executed the underwater sabotage, which killed a Greenpeace member aboard the ship *Rainbow Warrior* in Auckland, New Zealand. A man and a woman identified by state radio here as French military officers have been arrested by the New Zealand police and charged with arson and murder.

So far, Admiral Pierre Lacoste, the DGSE director, and other DGSE officials have refused to comment. The agency is, in fact, quite sensitive these days. An American reporter taking notes on a public sidewalk outside the compound was detained by seven Paris police officers yesterday and briefly interrogated in a police van. The officers had been summoned by DGSE security guards, who earlier had escorted the reporter out of *La Piscine*.

Over the years DGSE, an arm of the Ministry of Defense, has acquired a reputation as the home of right-wing agents and unauthorized "dirty tricks," the most famous being the 1965 killing of Mehdi Ben Barka, an opposition leader in the former French colony of Morocco. That action reportedly enraged Charles de Gaulle, the French president at the time.

In fact, the agency used to be called the Service de Documentation Exterieur et de Contre-espionnage, but its name was changed in 1981 by the new Socialist government to highlight an effort to clean up the agency's image and purge its ranks of

extremists. That step caused friction between President Francois Mitterrand and conservatives within the agency.

But one of the two authors of a new book on the DGSE said this week that although the agency has been responsible for many covert acts, unauthorized missions "are the exception — five or six."

Virtually all its operations have the oral approval of top defense officials — if not the president's office — and are not the work of renegades, said Roger Faligot, who wrote *La Piscine* with fellow journalist Pascal Krop after talking with 150 current and former DGSE agents.

In a telephone interview, Faligot said the service operates much like the CIA, spending most of its budget — \$58.8 million in 1982 — on gathering military and economic data. It does so both openly, from interviews and documents, and with undercover agents.

There are about 800 agents in the "action service" that carries out field operations deemed necessary for French security, Faligot said. He cited, among other actions, the 1956 destruction of a boat owned by a German who allegedly was running guns to Algerians fighting for independence from France.

Faligot said that the French military was more "politicized" than the

~~armed services of other Western countries, and that conservatives had taken matters into their own hands on occasion.~~

Several years ago, he said, some agents spread the rumor that Col. Moammar Khadafy of Libya was about to invade the former French colony of Chad, long before he actually did so. Their motive seemed to be to provoke an initial strike by the French army to protect Chad.

But the Greenpeace mission appears to have been officially sanctioned, Faligot said, citing his own sources and analysis.

One perplexing question, he said, is the mission's goal.

There are reports that French navy officers were worried about confronting Greenpeace ships seeking to monitor the planned series of nuclear tests at Mururoa in French Polynesia. There have been such confrontations in the past.

It appears, Faligot said, that the attack "was meant to be a pre-emptive strike."

But he said that the goal did not seem worth the risk to DGSE of being caught or killing someone, which is what happened. In addition, Greenpeace could send another ship, which it in fact has done.

"The big question," he said, "is not only who has done it, but why."